Virtue Ethics and Social Psychology

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Recently there has been a striking revival of what has been called virtue ethics: a kind of ethical theory whose basis is virtue and character, and which takes the primary ethical issue to be that of what kind of person I should aim to be. In everyday life we have always cared about virtue, for we care about whether we and other people are brave or cowardly, generous or stingy. We care about the kind of people we are making ourselves into by the way we live our lives; we think that the question, what kind of life I am living and whether I should improve it, is centrally important to my life. For over a century these issues have been ignored by academic ethical philosophy, which has treated them either as falling below the level of theory or as issues that a proper ethical theory actually gets rid of. The issues went away for some time in academic ethical theory, but since theory is not magic they never went away in the real world; they have persisted in ordinary ethical discourse and elsewhere in the culture, in popular psychology and self-help books. Now they have for some time returned from exile back into ethical theory and we find exciting new debates about the kind of structure for ethical thinking that we need when issues of virtue and the good life move back into the center.

There are many familiar objections to virtue ethics; I shall mention just a few of them. Virtue ethics, it is claimed, is too vague to tell us what to do; it is egoistic, and thus objectionable as a moral theory; it is morally conservative and it relies on a dubious notion of human nature. All these objections can, I am confident, be met, though not on this occasion. Recently, however, a new objection has been raised to virtue ethics, one which is quite fundamental, for if it turns out to have force then virtue ethics is in

trouble and the more familiar kinds of objection would not even be necessary. It is this objection I will be discussing today.

To construct a virtue ethics, we have to begin by answering the question, what is a virtue? We can come up with a few examples – courage, generosity and fairness are virtues. But what makes them virtues? A reasonable and intuitive answer is that a virtue is a disposition – a way I am as a matter of disposition and character. This is common to most accounts of virtue. For if someone is generous, say, that is an aspect of his character, and that is just to say that it is true of him that he is generous – not just on occasion, but as a matter of disposition, across his life. Even otherwise thin accounts of virtue, such as Hume's, make this point: a virtue is something stable and reliable. Virtues, then, are dispositions or what are called in psychology character traits. (Of course there is a lot more to be said about what virtues are, but this is the point most relevant to the current debate.)

Recently some philosophers, using psychological research, have claimed that a dispositional, character trait account of virtue presupposes claims about our moral psychology which are false. We just don't have dispositions or character traits of the kind the virtues would have to be. If so, then virtue ethics would be stymied at the very start, since it would rest on a false view of our psychology and what we are capable of. For we do take virtues to be dispositions in a substantial way. We see Jane act bravely on one occasion, say in rescuing a child from a dog. We think that Jane is brave, where this includes two thoughts: that Jane will continue to act bravely in this sort of situation (physical danger and risk), and that Jane will act bravely in a wide range of different situations where bravery may be called for. When, that is, we ascribe a virtue, we are ascribing a disposition which is robust, producing brave actions in a reliable way and one which is relevant to Jane's life overall, and thus global.

In everyday life, we often recognize that seeing Jane act in one type of situation is insufficient grounds for thinking her to be brave, period. The recent claim is that we are in worse shape than we think; our ascriptions of virtue and character are deeply in

error, as badly wrong as 'folk physics'[1]. For when we explain why Jane performed an action, we ascribe too much to character and too little to the impact of the situation that she is in. That we do this is explained by our making a variety of errors, notably the 'fundamental attribution error', which lead us to 'over-ascribe' to the agent's character what is better explained by the impact of the situation. Situationist psychologists claim that various experiments show that our actions are explained to a far greater extent than we believe by situations that we are in, sometimes features of situations of which we are not even aware. Here the infamous Milgram experiments are often referred to. Finding themselves in the situation of participating, as they thought, in a scientific experiment, the subjects did as they were told by the supposed scientists, even when told to do horrendous things. Whether they were compassionate people or not made no difference to all but a few. Another experiment often referred to[2] is one in which an actor dropped papers in front of an unsuspecting subject who had just made a phone call. The subjects either helped, or not; whether or not they did correlated not with whether they were caring people or not, but only with whether there was a coin in the phone return slot.

The case most commonly cited in this debate is an experiment[3] where Princeton Theological Seminary students were put into the following situation. After answering a questionnaire about their reasons for studying theology, they prepared to give a lecture on the parable of the Good Samaritan. On their way they encountered an actor pretending to be in distress. The only constant in the ways they responded – by stopping to help or by hurrying past -was the degree to which they were in a hurry. Situationists who recount this experiment tend to use it to reinterpret the Good Samaritan parable itself, as showing that the problem with the priest and the Levite,

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[1] 'The relation between lay personology and a more correct theory of personality is analogous to the relation between lay and scientific physics' (Ross and Nisbett (1991), 161; cf. 7-8.

[2] By Isen and Levin; it is referred to by both Harman and Doris. Miller (2004) followed up the subsequent psychological literature, where it emerges that when the experiment was repeated the results were wildly different. Doris (2002, p 180 n 4) dismisses this, in my view unsuccessfully.

who passed by on the other side, was not that they were uncaring but that they were running late. So far I have not found anyone who takes this line of thought to its logical conclusion, namely that the intent of the parable is not to show us that our neighbour is anyone who needs our help, but to impress on us the importance of good time management.

What is supposed to follow from these experiments as to the way we think of character traits, and in particular virtues? Social psychologists at first drew radical conclusions to the effect that our everyday discourse about character traits is radically wrong,[4] and, rather later in the day, some philosophers have recently seized on the experiments to defend a thesis which has hostile implications for virtue ethics. I shall use 'situationist' to refer to philosophers who use the situationist psychologists' work to attack virtue ethics, although I shall note differences between the most famous (or notorious) of them, Gilbert Harman and John Doris.[5] Harman[6] has claimed that the experiments show that there are no character traits. Scientists, he claims, have shown that we attribute character on the basis of actions which are in fact explained by the impact of situations; this is an error, since different situations produce different behaviour, while a character trait should have produced uniform behaviour. So, since (he assumes) this erroneous attribution is our only ground for ascribing character traits, we should conclude that there are none. Aggressively, he claims that 'we' (whoever 'we' are) should stop 'people' (other people presumably) talking in terms of virtue

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[3] By Darley and Batson, referred to very frequently.

[4] The debate in psychology, however, has largely settled down, and psychologists no longer draw melodramatic conclusions from the experimental material. See Gilbert (1995), Clarke (forthcoming).

[5] Less noticed in the debate is the article by Campbell (1999), which is more tentative in its conclusions.

[6] Harman (1999), (2000), (2001), where the thesis is stated in increasingly sweeping terms. In (2003) Harman seems to defend a weaker thesis more like that of Doris.

altogether. This refusal to talk about character traits at all renders serious debate with virtue ethics impossible[7].

A less extreme view has been defended by John Doris.[8] Doris claims that the psychology experiments undermine our everyday belief that people have global character traits, including the virtues. We think that Jane who bravely rescues the child from the dog will be reliably brave in a variety of different kinds of situation; but this is, he claims, defeated by the psychologists' experiments, which show that our response is caused in large part by the kind of situation we are in, even when we fail to recognize this. The thesis that we have global character traits, including the virtues, is, he claims, 'empirically inadequate': all but a few people fail to act in ways that we predict they would, if they had global traits. If we are in familiar, repeated situations, then we can build up a local trait of acting in a certain way, but these traits do not have 'cross-situational consistency'; if we predict that people will act consistently with that trait in a different situation, most people will let us down.

So we might have local traits, which are encouraged by repeatable situations. Many of the Princeton students, for example, might be compassionate in leisurely situations where they had time to reflect, and were in the company of like-minded people. But in a situation which confronted them with a stranger when they were in a hurry they reacted differently. Thus they lacked a robust trait of compassion to motivate them across different types of situation; they were merely compassionate in leisurely situations, not in hurried ones. Doris concludes that we can have local traits, supported by repeated situations, but that the idea that we have global traits is a mistake, an over-attribution which fails to take account of the fact, dramatically shown

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[7] In his (2000) exchange with Athannasoulis, Harman simply repeats his claim that there are no character traits, ignoring pertinent objections to the idea that the experimental material warrants conclusions about character in particular. However, he claims that his view is consistent with very weak forms of virtue ethics such as are defended by Merritt (2000) and in the work of Judith Thomson (but since the latter talks only of actions it is not really a virtue form of theory).

[8] Doris (1998) and (2002).

up in the experiments, that people largely fail to act in consistent ways across different types of situation.

If there are no global traits, there is no character as we think of that, namely as a (relatively) unified combination of traits. So virtue ethics, on this view, is further mistaken in thinking that we have (relatively) unified characters in the first place. Before we try to improve our characters by aiming to be brave, fair and so on, we should realize that there is no overall character to improve. Rather, our character is what Doris calls 'fragmented'; I cannot count on the tendency I have developed to be brave in one kind of situation to carry over to others, where rather than continuing to be reinforced it might be undermined by features of the new situation, including features like being in a hurry, or being in a group of other people, or even features that I might not be aware of. My attitude to my own life has to become more a matter of strategy, seeking out or avoiding types of situation rather than relying on my having a unified character.

Is virtue ethics in fact mistaken as to our psychology, wrong about the feasibility of our becoming virtuous? This is an objection which it is important to meet, especially since I allowed that, whatever the state of affairs in currently fashionable psychology, we do recognize that we are sometimes mistaken about character traits when we ascribe them on the basis of actions in one kind of situation alone.

We certainly do take the virtues to be global traits. If we think that someone is compassionate, we think that he is compassionate over his life as a whole. How do we react when we find him failing to be compassionate when he is in a hurry? Do we conclude that his compassion is fine in other, leisurely situations, but unfortunately not when he is in a hurry? If so, we would stop expecting him to be compassionate when he is in a hurry, and would encourage him to be more reliably compassionate by urging him always to avoid being in a hurry. But when we think about this, we can see that it makes no sense. Trying to think of a virtue as local, in the way that the situationists do,

turns out to run up against important points about what a virtue is. So we need to look at what a virtue is, before returning to evaluate the situationists' attack on it.

In what follows, I shall be relying on a broadly acceptable notion of what a virtue is, one which comes from what I call 'the virtue ethics tradition', which is over two thousand years old and has its most famous systematization in Aristotle. Many recent theories calling themselves virtue ethics work with thinner notions of virtue. The virtue ethics tradition is the best place to look for an account of virtue for two reasons: it is a well-worked-out tradition resulting from centuries of debate (whereas some modern versions of virtue ethics are making initial moves) and the notion of virtue it starts from is the intuitive one found in everyday discourse (whereas some modern theories work from notions of virtue which are explicitly theory-based).

A virtue, being a character trait or disposition, is built up from habituation, and can be called a habit. But in the version of virtue ethics I am defending, it is not a mindless habit which bypasses the agent's practical reasoning. This is because it is a disposition to act, exercised through the agent's practical reasoning. It is a disposition built up as a result of making choices, not a causal deposit within the agent of the effects of past behaviour. The difference here can be illustrated by the difference between being habitually honest on the one hand, and biting your nails on the other. Further, a virtue is a disposition exercised in making choices. When the honest person refrains from taking something to which she is not entitled, this is not a reflex, or the predictable causal upshot of a habit, but a decision which endorses and strengthens her honesty.

So the exercise of the agent's practical reasoning is essential to the way a virtue is built up and the way it is exercised.[9] There are forms of virtue ethics which deny this (ones which stem from Hume and from the utilitarian tradition) but I think it is clear that they are working with a thin, reduced conception of virtue. Julia Driver, who defends such a position, calls the classical position 'intellectualist' and rejects it on the

[9] This point is made in a strangely neglected article by DePaul (1999).

grounds that it is 'elitist'. 'Virtue must be accessible,'[10] she says,meaning that it must be open to anybody at any time to be virtuous, while she thinks that it is elitist to require virtue to operate through the agent's practical reasoning, since most people aren't capable of the required practical reasoning. This seems an odd objection to me; surely it is more elitist to deny that most people are capable of the reasoning needed to be virtuous? I see no reason to deny this, and so no sense in which classical virtue ethics is elitist.

How does the agent's practical reasoning work? Virtue is the disposition to do the right thing for the right reason, in the appropriate way – honestly, courageously, and so on. This involves two aspects, the affective and the intellectual.

The affective aspect of virtue brings in the point that the agent may do the right thing and have a variety of feelings about it. She may hate doing the right thing, but do it anyway; she may have to struggle with her feelings to do the right thing; she may do the right thing effortlessly and with no internal opposition; and so on. Now within virtue ethics there is a variety of options on this. Classical virtue ethics always holds that doing the right thing readily and without contrary inclination is a mark of the virtuous person, as opposed to the one who is merely self-controlled. But different theories hold differing positions on the form this takes. Kantian ethics famously diverges from classical virtue ethics in holding that virtue is a kind of strength of will to do the right thing regardless of your feelings. These are important disputes, but more important for the debates at hand is the intellectual side.

The virtuous agent doesn't just do the right thing, she does it for the right reason – because she understands that this is the right thing to do.[11] And she does this dispositionally – she has a character such that she understands on each occasion what the right thing to do is. How is this understanding built up?

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[10] Driver (2001), 54.

[11] Within the virtue ethics tradition, there are various ways in which this is further explicated.

We start our moral education by learning from others, both in making particular judgements about what is right and wrong, and in adopting some people as role models or teachers. At first, as pupils, we adopt these views because we were told to, or because they seemed obvious, and we acquire a collection of moral views which are fragmented and accepted on the authority of others.

Thus, our moral views may be a mess, and will almost certainly contain inconsistencies and gaps. But the learner will not stick there. He will begin to reflect for himself on what he has accepted. He will detect and deal with inconsistencies, and will try to unify his judgements and practice in terms of wide principles which explain the practice and thus enable him to explain and justify the particular judgements he makes. This is a process which cannot occur overnight, because it requires experience and practice. It is a process which requires the agent at every stage to use his mind, to think about what he is doing and to try to achieve understanding of it. This happens because learning is not a purely passive absorption of the views of others but involves an aspiration to go beyond these. To recognize that you are a learner is to recognize that you have an aspiration to improve. This is encouraged in contexts of good ethical education, which gets the pupil to think for herself about what she has been taught.

To take an example: in many societies the obvious models for courage are macho ones, and focus on sports or war stories. A boy may grow up thinking that these are the paradigmatic contexts for courage, and have various views about courage and cowardice which take this for granted. But if he reflects about the matter, he may come to think that he is also prepared to call people in other, quite different contexts brave – a child struggling with cancer, someone standing up for an unpopular person or opinion in high school, and so on. Further reflection will show that the macho grasp of courage was limited and isolated, and will drive him to ask what links all these very different cases of bravery. As he comes to understand what bravery is, he becomes more critical

of the views that he first was taught, or found obvious, and modifies or rejects some of his original judgements and attitudes.[12]

This development of ethical knowledge proceeds like the acquisition of a practical skill or expertise. As Aristotle says, becoming just is like becoming a builder.[13] It's worth pausing to note how strikingly low-key is this analogy for ethical improvement: acquiring a virtue is like acquiring a practical skill. The point is that there is something to learn, something conveyed by teaching. And learning is, as stated, not just mindless absorption but involves an aspiration to improve. Learning is a process which goes from taking over information or skill from others to making the material one's own, being able to understand, or perform, oneself. The expert is the person who has learnt and who as a result comes to reflect on and understand what she has been taught, and to think for herself about it. We are all familiar with the point that there are expert mechanics, plumbers and so on. What makes them experts, rather than learners, is that they understand what they do. They do not mechanically follow the rule-book, but approach each new challenge in a way informed by long practice, but ready to respond in creative ways to unfamiliar challenges.

By this point it has become obvious that we are working with a notion of reason which has been excluded from many modern discussions of ethics, and also from much modern work in psychology. For this is, precisely, practical reason, the reasoning which is exercised in doing something or making something. It is quite obviously not the notion of reason common in modern discussions, sometimes labelled 'Humean',

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[12] All forms of virtue ethics which stress this role of practical reasoning move to some version of the unity of the virtues. For only a little thought shows that a real understanding of honesty, say, can scarcely be achieved in isolation from understanding the various factors which may interact with, and affect, an agent's honesty. Honest action is not a safely compartmentalized part of the agent's life. Thus, understanding honesty will turn out to require understanding one's life as a whole, and the relevance of many other factors.

[13] Nicomachean Ethics II 1-3, where many aspects are brought out of the analogy of ethical reasoning with the reasoning of the person with a practical skill. Aristotle

according to which reason is itself not practical, but merely works out the means to an end, while ends are set by desire, which functions independently of reason. I don't intend to argue against this conception here, but merely to make a methodological point. Sometimes modern philosophers write as though the 'Humean' account of reasoning simply gave an account of the way we actually reason, and if you think that, then an account of practical reasoning of the sort implied in classical virtue ethics is going to look overblown, extravagantly claiming for reason what is, in the 'Humean' theory, the function of desire. But this is a mistaken account of the matter. Both the 'Humean' account and what I shall call the classical account of practical reasoning, which takes the basic model to be that of a practical skill, are theoretical accounts of what reason is and how it works. As in many other fields, the actual way we reason is imperfect and underdetermines the best theory of it. The classical theory is empirically better supported than the 'Humean' one in that it does give a good account of many areas of practical expertise for which the 'Humean' account is pretty unconvincing.[14] But they are both theoretical accounts of practical reasoning. So it would be bad methodology to assume the truth of the 'Humean' account and fancy that this constitutes a criticism of the classical account of practical reasoning.

Virtue, then, is a disposition to which the agent's practical reasoning is essential.[15] And that practical reasoning, as we have seen, has a form whose model is that of a practical expertise. Two points need to be stressed, because they are often ignored by opponents of virtue ethics. Firstly, practical expertise, including the understanding of the virtuous person, is highly situation-sensitive. It is only the absolute beginner who does what he does because he has been told to do so, or is

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stresses ways in which virtue is unlike skill, but these concern its goals rather than its structure.

[14] See my (2001), which develops the classical model of practical knowledge further than there is scope to do here.

[15] In this paper I have used the most familiar example, Aristotle's account of moral development, which relies on role-models. However, within the virtue ethics tradition

copying the expert, and who acts in a way which is not responsive to the specific demands of the situation. As soon as he develops understanding of what he is doing, he brings to each situation an understanding of what he should do which has been built up by practice, but is active and responsive to what needs to be done now, in this situation. Similarly for virtue. Because virtue is a disposition built up from and exercised in choices, it is, unlike habit, always sensitive to change and to the new demands of each situation. Aristotle says that the virtuous person acts from a settled and unchangeable disposition, and this is very often misunderstood –particularly by opponents of virtue ethics, as we'll see. Aristotle doesn't mean that the virtuous person ploughs on regardless of what new situations offer by way of challenge.[16] The virtuous person will not shift from being honest just because a big temptation offers, for example; so, she is reliably honest. But this demands, rather than excluding, her being intelligently responsive to the situation.

Secondly, the reliability of the virtuous character often leads to its being seen as static and rigid, a rather uninspiring achievement. But this is a complete misconception. Once we appreciate the role in virtue of the agent's practical reasoning, we can see that virtue ethics emphasises the way that our ethical life is always in a process of development. We are all the time dealing with new and complex situations which affect not only what we do but how we handle the decisions, as we endorse or modify our dispositions in the way we deliberate. The person who is stably and reliably honest is not the person who has already completed all her ethical development, but the person who brings to the occasion the most developed intelligence and open-mindedness.

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there are alternatives, for example the Stoic version, which gives more prominence to rules and principles.

[16] He also doesn't mean that once you have developed a character you can't change, though this is a frequent misunderstanding. He says at Categories 13 a 22 – 31 that the bad person can slowly change his character by first acting in a different way, then gradually coming to see the point of it. Character change is difficult, given the amount of practice needed not just to act well but to become a good person, but it is possible if you put in the effort.

Let us return to the situationists' objections to virtue.Virtue and other character traits are, they allege, 'empirically inadequate' because people who think they have such traits surprisingly often fail to act in accordance with them, and do so in ways that can be explained by the impact on them of the situation they were in. The immediate response is that all this shows is something we already knew, namely that most people aren't virtuous, and they give in to immediate temptations; all the situationists have added is that factors we had not suspected, such as being in a hurry, can also get us to act in ways that constitute failure of a given trait. But this response on its own is inadequate. Some versions of virtue ethics do take generosity, compassion and so on to be possessed only by a very few people, but most have a more complex view which rejects this, so that this response alone would in fact undermine the idea that virtue ethics does presuppose a realistic psychology.

What is 'empirically inadequate' about the view that we have character traits like virtues? The experimenters observed that many subjects in an experiment failed to perform the action that the experimenters had predicted that they would perform. The result is 'empirical' in being a record of behaviour observable by a third party. Situationists conclude immediately from failure of behaviour to failure of the virtue, since a virtue is supposed to be 'behaviourially reliable', where this is taken to mean that most people with the virtue will produce the predicted behaviour.

But, as we have seen at length, a virtue is not a habit of reliably producing behaviour of a type independently fixed; it is a disposition to act on reasons of a certain kind. What is reliable and steady is the virtuous person's disposition to act on reasons of bravery, generosity and so on. So the honest person will reliably perform honest actions, where these are actions done for reasons of a certain kind (for short, reasons of honesty). An observer, particularly a scientist setting up an experiment, is recording behaviour of a certain kind: picking up money, copying in a test and so on. And there are many ways in which this kind of observation may fail to track what is important for virtue, namely the kind of reasons acted on.

Firstly, the observer and the agent may not be in agreement as to what counts, in this situation, as an action of the virtue in question. The observer may count as dishonest an action that the agent thought was permissible.[17] Given the complexity of everyday life, it is unlikely that we will have come up with exhaustive lists of kinds of action which are always demanded by a given virtue. Even if we could, life does not come compartmentalized, so that in a given situation an action may be demanded by honesty, say, but rejected by tact. Every situation presents us with a number of salient factors such that even if we knew which actions were demanded by different virtues there would still be a problem judging the action performed. Someone who is reliably kind may do a harsh action which we later understand to be kinder than we thought, given the whole background. These are all just ways of bringing out the fact that an observer does not understand what the agent is actually doing until, and to the extent that, the observer has access to the agent's reasons. This is a familiar fact of everyday life, but is somewhat obscured in the situationists' experiments.

Still, we may say, there are some cases where it really is clear that this behaviour in this situation is relevant to possession, or not, of the virtue. Failing to help the stranger in trouble surely showed that most of the Princeton students lacked compassion. But this is not so immediately clear. They failed to help. Did they lack the right reasons? Not if they had previously been reliably more compassionate; if so, they had the right reasons, but these were overridden by haste, or by the self-centred desire to give an impressive presentation, or both.[18] That some of them at least had the right reasons although they did not act on them is shown by later shame and remorse at their actions.[19] (The same appears to be true of the Milgram subjects, although the facts here

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[17] Sreenivasan (2002) discusses this sort of phenomenon with regard to an early study of schoolchildren.

[18] Situationists assume that the only relevant motivation was the bare fact of being in a hurry, but this is implausible; the students were going to give a presentation, and surely the desire to come across well played a role, so that here the virtue was competing with another character trait, of a more selfish kind, as well as with the impact of the situation.

[19] Campbell (1999) discusses some of the follow-up to the experiment.

are very contested in the literature.) Shame is the emotion which reminds the agent, unpleasantly, of having acted in a way that they consider wrong, and which urges them to act better in future. (It is because shame plays this role of unifying the agent's life that Doris urges that we give it up.) For possession or not of a virtue it is the agent's reasons which matter; this is just a mundane implication of the point that a virtue is a disposition to act on a certain kind of reason. There are many ways in which someone might have the right kind of reasons but, on a particular occasion, not do so. They might be tempted to act otherwise for selfish reasons. They might also be influenced by subconscious factors such as being in a hurry, or being in a group. They might be muddled, not knowing how to act in this situation. They might be crass or rigid, failing to see that this situation demands generosity, or courage.

These are all ways in which people who fail to act in accordance with a virtue might have reasons of a relevant kind, but not bring them to bear in the situation, so that their failure to act on that occasion does not show that they lacked the virtue. They lack something, though: what is it? They lack the kind of intelligent responsiveness to new or unexpected situations which characterizes the virtuous person who is analogous to the practical expert. They are like learners – they are learners – because they think too rigidly. Their notion of compassion, say, is still derivative from others, or from their lessons, and their grasp of it is not intelligent enough to bring it to bear where it is required, if there is something unforeseen about the circumstance.

One main reason for this, though not the only one, is that many people's concept of a virtue is, as already indicated, too tied to a particular kind of situation, often the context in which it was acquired or taught. The main problem that the situationists point to is that of failure of virtue in cross-situational consistency – but this is not only just what you would expect from the account of virtue I have sketched, it shows how that account explains the kind of mistakes we make which include the 'fundamental attribution error'. We fail to think beyond the contexts in which we have seen someone act, or acted ourselves. We fail to be attentive enough to the situation and context, and so get tripped up by factors like being in a hurry. We think that we, or others, are brave,

or generous or whatever, but our grasp of this is superficial and conventional; so we can fail to act bravely, or generously, when we should, and find that others fail likewise. But it is only if we neglect the practical reasoning central to virtue that we will react by deeming that the virtues in question do not exist. Our actual response is, in our own case, to feel shame and remorse, and resolve to do better. This is not a resolve to strategize the situations we are in, trying absurdly, for example, never to be in a hurry. Rather, it is a resolve to think more intelligently about what it actually involves to be, for example, compassionate. With luck, the situationists' experiments may have shocked some of the subjects into realizing that more thought and work was required from them before they could think of themselves as compassionate.[20]

So the situationists' experiments do not force us to reject virtues as global character traits. But perhaps the view that the situationists prefer, namely that we have only local character traits, has advantages over the moral psychology of the virtues? We aren't compelled by the facts, as the situationists think, to give up the idea that bravery and generosity are global traits, getting us to act in relevantly similar ways across a wide variety of types of situation. But maybe it might still be an improvement, from the ethical point of view, if we thought of ourselves as having characters that are fragmented, rather than robust.

Doris claims that if I think of myself not as having the global trait of bravery over my life as a whole, but rather several local traits, such as bravery-in-situations-of-physical-danger, lack-of-bravery-in-situations-of-moral-pressure and so on, I will be better equipped to meet the dangers of the world, and more sensitive in my moral deliberations. He tells the tale of unfortunate person A, who when his spouse is absent

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[20] These factors are all, of course, much harder for an observer to take account of than the easily observable action, which may be one reason why simply observing the action has been so over-emphasised in these experiments. An experiment that really tested for the presence of a virtue would have to be much more sophisticated, taking into account the agent's reasons (with allowance made for problems with self-reporting, since the agent's own view of the situation would clearly be critical).

blunders into seduction by a colleague through relying on strength of character in an intimate situation instead of avoiding that situation in the first place. The more intelligent and sensitive person B, by contrast, recognizes early danger signals and hence manages to avoid the perilous situation. Relying on virtue, Doris claims, is like relying on strength of character and the force of habit alone, without recognizing the need to evaluate situations and the varying pressures they will predictably bring to bear. Only a situationist, who does not think in terms of having an overall character, thinking of himself rather in terms of tendencies to respond to different kinds of situation, will have the practical intelligence to avert the need for strength of character – just as well, if there is no such thing.

But virtue ethics has never, over more than two thousand years, told us to develop characters which will determine our behaviour in fixed and lumpish ways, getting us to go ahead blindly without attention to situations. We have seen why this is so: virtue is not a matter of mindlessly building up habits, but of developing flexible and intelligent responses to the wide variety of complex situations that life faces us with. Doris says things like, 'Our duties may be surprisingly complex, involving not simply obligations to particular actions but a sort of "cognitive duty" to attend, in our deliberations, to the determinative features of situations'.[21] But this is not an indictment of virtue ethics, as he supposes it to be. This is something which virtue ethicists can cheer all the way; it is something which the virtue ethics tradition has always emphasised. It remains something of a mystery to me why opponents of virtue ethics should so persistently represent virtue as a fixed habit built up by mindless repetition.

There is another important implication of the view that we do not have virtues, but only local traits. If it is a mistake to think that when faced by a new type of situation I will act in a way consistent with my actions in a previous type of situation, then my reasons for action will not be consistent over my life as a whole. This is just what Doris

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[21] p 148

holds when he insists that there is no such thing as unified character; we are all fragmented selves more like Rameau's nephew than we like to think.[22] Doris claims that here again situationism helps us to a better ethical position: we should cease to think of the self as an 'evaluatively integrated "whole"' and, among other things, stop feeling shame, which encourages us to think about our life as a whole, and thus stands in the way of moving on and getting a life.[23]

On this view, thinking in terms of the virtues encourages a stick-in-the-mud attitude to life, obsessing over the consistency of our actions, past with present and one area of life with another. The better alternative, according to Doris, is to accept that I have reasons of one kind for acting in one area of my life, without these having to be reasons for acting in other areas, and thus reasons applying over my life as a whole. I might act on reasons of one kind at work say, and on quite different reasons at home. And this is fine; if we demand more than this we are assuming a false psychology of global traits.

Is this fine? Some reasons bring evaluative commitments with them. Can we accept that the values on which we act in one area of life can be values which we regard as irrelevant in another? Take an example. Mary treats her colleagues at work with respect and courtesy, is collegial and friendly to work with. But she humiliates waiters in restaurants, screams at her son's soccer coach and is demanding and rude to shop assistants. Suppose I am a colleague of Mary's and think that she is a respectful person, mindful of the dignity of the people she interacts with. Then one sad day I see her in a shop and a restaurant and at the soccer pitch. If the situationists are right, I have simply discovered that Mary is a more complex and interesting person than I suspected; she is respectful to colleagues but, intriguingly, not to waiters, shop assistants and soccer coaches. Nothing to worry about, and no reason for me to change my attitude to Mary, as long as I am confident that henceforth I will encounter her only at work.

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[22] p. 62-64.
[23] p 160-164, 166.

But this is not what happens. Firstly, when I encounter Mary's rudeness I am shocked; when we find people whose behaviour can't be evaluatively integrated we are puzzled, and seek a reason for the breakdown. Secondly, once we see the whole picture we don't just think of Mary as a person who happens to have different reasons in different situations; we re-evaluate her reasons in the original situation. If I am Mary's colleague, I cannot now think of her behaviour at work in the same way I did before. I now know that she is respectful to people whose opinions she needs to take account of, and disrespectful to people whose opinions she can safely ignore. But someone whose behaviour is respectful does not have as their reason that they behave respectfully because this is someone whose opinion of them matters. Their reason is something like that they behave respectfully because everyone deserves to be treated with respect. And this is a reason for behaving with respect to the waiters, coach and shop assistants just as much as to the colleagues. This is, of course, why we are shocked when we discover the rude behaviour to the people that don't matter to Mary. What we find is that her behaviour to her colleagues was not actually respectful at all; the rudeness to waiters shows that her behaviour to her colleagues expressed not respect, but hypocrisy or deference. She does not, we say, understand what respect really is; for if she did, she would make her behaviour in these different areas consistent.

A situationist might respond that our shock, and re-evaluation, are all just part of the same mistake we made in thinking that Mary, or anyone, has a global trait in the first place. But note that we now have two explanatory strategies for making sense of Mary, and the situationist's strategy does a bad job by any reasonable standard for explanation. For it requires a peculiar dispersal of explanatory factors. We have no trouble making sense of Mary (whatever we think about her); but the situationist has to explain her behaviour by appealing to facts about soccer pitches, shops and restaurants. He seems to have two options: either to admit that we can, whatever we think, actually make no sense of Mary, or that we will, despite appearances, find out what it is that unifies soccer pitches, shops and restaurants to make them into rudeness-triggers, and, moreover, rudeness-triggers just for Mary. Neither option looks very appealing.

The situationist may respond that this goes too fast. He may say that we do understand Mary without positing a trait that unifies her behaviour. She has developed a local trait for work, and three separate local traits for soccer pitches, shops and restaurants. As long as we know which kind of situation we are dealing with, we know what to expect from Mary. Why is this not enough?

There are several things that can be said here. Firstly, we have the three separate local traits of rudeness-at-soccer-pitches, rudeness-in shops and rudeness-in-restaurants. Mary seems to be fragmented into a host of mini-traits. And it seems to be sheer coincidence that we can unify Mary's behaviour in shops and restaurants and at soccer pitches more easily than we can unify her behavior in any one of these with her behaviour at work. On the situationist view, this may even be a mistake; perhaps there is no unifying trait of rudeness in all three situations. Certainly the nature of the situations offers no explanatory help here.

Further, so far we have just said that we are shocked by the contrast between Mary's respectful behaviour at work and rudeness elsewhere. What of Mary's own take on this? According to the situationist, Mary should not strive to unify her behaviour overall, and so should not strive to recognize relevantly unifying beliefs, such as the belief that people at work matter whereas people in shops, etc. don't. Suppose Mary successfully compartmentalizes her own attitudes here, moving between work and shops without any attempt to unify her attitudes. The problem for the situationist here is that relevant similarities between people at work and people in shops, etc. are sufficiently obvious to any ordinary person that we seem forced to conclude that Mary is either very stupid, or is in denial. The latter is more plausible: we think that she recognizes that she is treating people differently with insufficient justification (since the different situations certainly do not justify the different treatment) but does not want to recognize this. For if she did, she would do what we do: feel shock, re-evaluate her behaviour at work, and, hopefully, unify her behaviour in the right direction.

People like Mary do improve. We have just seen what it would take for Mary to become respectful rather than rude in shops: integrating her values overall so that there

is no unjustifiable difference between her behaviour in shops and her behaviour at work. On the situationist view, the improvement would have to have nothing to do with her behaviour at work; it would have to happen independently of that and of her behaviour at soccer pitches and in restaurants. We would just have to hope that she had some experiences in shops which had the effect of making her less rude in shops, and hope further that similar things happened independently in the other situations. But this amounts to giving up on the hope that Mary improves, as opposed to hoping that some things happen around Mary.

This kind of example shows that there are deep problems in trying to think of a virtue as a merely local trait, and in trying to think of ourselves as having only such traits. It turns out to be false that our ethical outlook is improved if we reject the idea that a virtue is a global trait, or that we do not need to be evaluatively integrated if we are to make sense of ourselves and others.

Rather, exploring the attacks made on virtue ethics by the situationists turns out to show how deep goes the idea that having a virtue is having, and acting on, reasons that are operative across your life overall. We run into profound trouble if we try to make sense of virtue in any way that denies this. And this is not surprising if we remember that virtue ethics has typically been an ethics of character, an ethics where we are supposed not just to have virtues in isolation but to do this as part of a project of becoming a certain kind of person.

There have been forms of virtue ethics in which having the virtues has been cut off from the project of thinking about our own deliberations and the reasons we have as agents. In different ways Hume and the utilitarians have taken a virtue to be no more than a disposition which in fact serves to produce something good – social harmony for Hume, some state of affairs for the utilitarians. Nobody owns the term virtue, so we cannot reject such theories as theories of virtue. But it is clear that theories like this lose the major point of virtue in the mainstream tradition of virtue ethical thinking. For being brave, generous or compassionate is a matter of the kind of person you are; and

this matters because it matters ethically what kind of person you are. The different virtues, once we start thinking about them rigorously, lead to a character which is unified (while remaining, as explained, open and flexible).

Virtue ethics, then, has no need to fear modern social psychology. It can go further, welcoming and making use of its findings. It has to insist, however, that social psychologists interpret virtue properly – not just as a causal explanation of behaviour but as a disposition to act on reasons that hold across one's character as a whole, a disposition which needs reference to these reasons as well as to behaviour if we are to understand it.

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